Pope Sergius III - The 119th Pope - PopeHistory.com

Pope Sergius III was the 119th pope serving as the leader of the Catholic Church. His time as pope was during a violent and chaotic historical period. Italy had not yet become a nation state. Instead, feudal nobles controlled extensive territory on the Italian Peninsula. The Papacy ruled directly over lands near Rome in Central Italy.

About The Life And Times of Pope Sergius III

Historians do not possess a lot of information about the childhood of Pope Sergius III. He apparently belonged to an aristocratic family in Rome. Some sources consider him a relative of an Italian nobleman named Theophylact I of Tusculum.

The future Pope Sergius III apparently became a member of the clergy at a young age. In 893, Pope Formosus installed Sergius as the Bishop of Caere. Pope Theodore II subsequently reconfirmed his ordination. After the Pope's death a few years later, supporters and family members of Sergius in Rome sought to have the young Bishop elected as Pope.

Although Sergius' supporters maintained they had elected him to the office in 898, a powerful member of the nobility, the Emperor Lambert, supported another candidate instead. He worked to persuade the church leadership to select a different clergyman, Pope John IX.

Fearing retaliation, Sergius returned to Caere. There he received protection from military forces led by another feudal lord, the Margrave Adalbert II. Meanwhile, Pope John IX convened a synod to take disciplinary action against Sergius and many of his supporters.

John IX passed away in January, 900 after serving as Pope for less than two years. His successor, Pope Benedict IV, also remained in office only briefly, until July 30, 903. The next Pope, Leo V, served in office only 124 days until he was deposed and imprisoned by Christopher (today reportedly considered an antipope). Christopher seized control of the papal lands in Italy by force.

A nobleman named Theophylact of Tusculum organized a revolt against Christopher. He raised an army and invited his relative, Sergius, to return to Rome. Sergius had previously maintained he had been elected to serve as Pope Sergius III several years earlier. With support from Margrave Adalbert II and Theophylact of Tusculum, Sergius III moved back to Rome. He was installed as the new Pope on January 29, 904.

Theophylact and his army had previously secured control of Rome and the papal lands. He had placed Christopher in prison after his arrival. Both the deposed Pope Leo V and Christopher reportedly died in prison sometime during early 904. Yet the responsibility for these murders today remains unclear.

Pope Sergius III served as the head of the Catholic Church until his death from natural causes on April 14, 911. He held office for a period of 7 years and 75 days. During this time, he reportedly sometimes wore the papal tiara, a gold and gemstone encrusted crown, signifying his authority over papal lands.

Several important events occurred during his papacy. The Byzantine Emperor Leo VI requested his permission to marry for the fourth time. A complete separation, or schism, had not yet occurred between Christian church leaders in western and eastern parts of Europe during this period. Although the Patriarch of Constantinople refused Emperor Leo VI’s request to remarry, Pope Sergius III granted his approval of the marriage.

Additionally, Sergius III took steps to rebuild and restore some church properties which had sustained damage previously. In 896 an earthquake had destroyed much of the Lateran Palace. Sergius III ordered this residence near Rome refurbished. In 905, he also helped provide funds to rebuild a church damaged by a Saracen raiding party.

Magyar raiders had previously attacked Nonantola Abbey. Pope Sergius III assisted with the rebuilding of this Christian religious site, also.

After his death on April 14, 911, the body of Pope Sergius III was buried in Rome. Today his tomb rests in St. Peter’s Basilica.

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Quick Facts

Born: The exact date of birth of Pope Sergius III remains unknown. He was likely born near Rome sometimes between 860 and 870.
Birth Name: Unknown.
Died: April 14, 911.
Cause of Death: Apparently, he died from natural causes.
Papacy Began: Most sources date January 29, 904 as the beginning of his papacy.
Papacy Ended: April 14, 911
Followed by: Pope Anastasius III

Interesting Facts About This Pope

- Pope Sergius III served as Pope during a turbulent and violent historical era.
- Although brief, the seven years and seventy-five days of his papacy provided greater continuity and stability than the tenures of most of his immediate predecessors.
- Pope Sergius is considered to be one of the worst Popes in history.
- A chronicle writer reportedly claimed over 50 years after his death that Pope Sergius III had fathered a child. However, no contemporaries made that claim (not even his most bitter enemies). The allegations, which circulate widely online today, apparently constitute an attack upon the good character of Pope Sergius III.

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